

WEST

LOS ANGELES TIMES • NOVEMBER 20, 1966

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WEST magazine, a weekly publication,
is owned by the Los Angeles Times,
Times Mirror Square, Los Angeles, Cal-
ifornia 90023 and distributed exclusively
each Sunday by the Los Angeles Times.

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Los Angeles Times WEST magazine, November 20, 1966 7

The Wild Scene

Street Racing: 'A Squall Every Night'

by Rob Ross

It's two o'clock in the morning, at the corner of Venice and Robertson, and the stillness is broken by the driving beat of a pair of racing cars and the stentorian rattle of four unmuffled tail pipes. A maroon Chrysler and a dull grey Corvette both wait at a red light, straining at the useless delay of a deserted intersection, waiting . . .

Then the light changes, and the cars seem to shudder momentarily, then leap forward. The noise is almost unbearable, bouncing between buildings like a mortar barrage in an echo chamber. It goes on, 40 feet, 200 feet, a quarter of a mile—all in a space of perhaps 10 seconds.

Suddenly the race is over, and the noise slowly fades as the tail lights disappear around a corner and out of sight.

The extraordinary scene and the unreal sounds that go with it are getting to be almost commonplace in Los Angeles, where noise

and fast cars are as easily ignored these days as a cough on a downtown street corner.

In other major cities, drag racing on the streets and parkways is an occasional phenomenon, a freak thundershower. In Los Angeles, there is a squall every night. Last year, for example, the Los Angeles Police Department issued 2,120 citations for "speed contests," an astonishing figure considering that it represents only a small fraction—certainly no more than a tenth—of the actual number of races. Moreover, street racing is not confined to a section or two of the city; like smog, it is ubiquitous. Even the otherwise sacrosanct streets of Beverly Hills have a piece of the action.

Los Angeles' pre-eminence in street racing comes with the size of the territory, some 460 square miles, and the profusion of streets that criss-cross it. This, combined with a police force numbering 5,200 (compared to New

York's 24,000), makes adequate police control impossible.

If the size of the city offers the opportunity, the lack of adequate public transportation provides the means. There are 7,000,000 people in Los Angeles County, and 3,000,000 cars, more than there are legal drivers. This only suggests what is already well-known: Los Angeles teen-agers not only drive, but own, automobiles. And, as one might suspect, teen-agers do much of the street racing, though not all of it.

Jimmy, clean-cut and smiling, might have stepped from a *Seventeen* ad for bleeding madras sportswear. Jimmy moved here with his family from Houston two years ago. He plans a career in the military after graduation from University High year after next. Now, on his way home from football practice, he thinks about his plans for that night. After dinner, Jimmy will take his '64 T-Bird, and

Continued



Street Racing Continued

meet some friends near school. "The cops," he says, smiling, "aren't on to it yet. There's nothing like this in Houston. Here, the average guy my age races himself, or knows somebody who races. You go to practically any one of the drive-ins, you'll find guys looking for a race."

Though a tour of the bargain-burger drive-ins is apt to produce a sense of *deja-vu*, Bob's in Van Nuys is indisputably the mecca of teen-age street-racing. "Everybody," says Jimmy, "knows about Bob's."

On this particular Friday night, it's easy to believe that everybody knows about Bob's. The line of cars waiting for an empty slot stretches from the side-street entrance to the corner and then a block down Van Nuys Blvd. In front of the restaurant, beneath the pink neon legend "Bob's Home of the Big Boy," 30 or so brightly costumed car-watchers are observing the procession.

The cars themselves are visually unremarkable. In this age of kandy-kolored, tangerine-flake, streamline-babies, even a '61 Plymouth with an outsized rear end and magnesium-rimmed racing slicks hardly qualifies as a timeless curiosity. Nevertheless, cars are indubitably what's happening at Bob's.

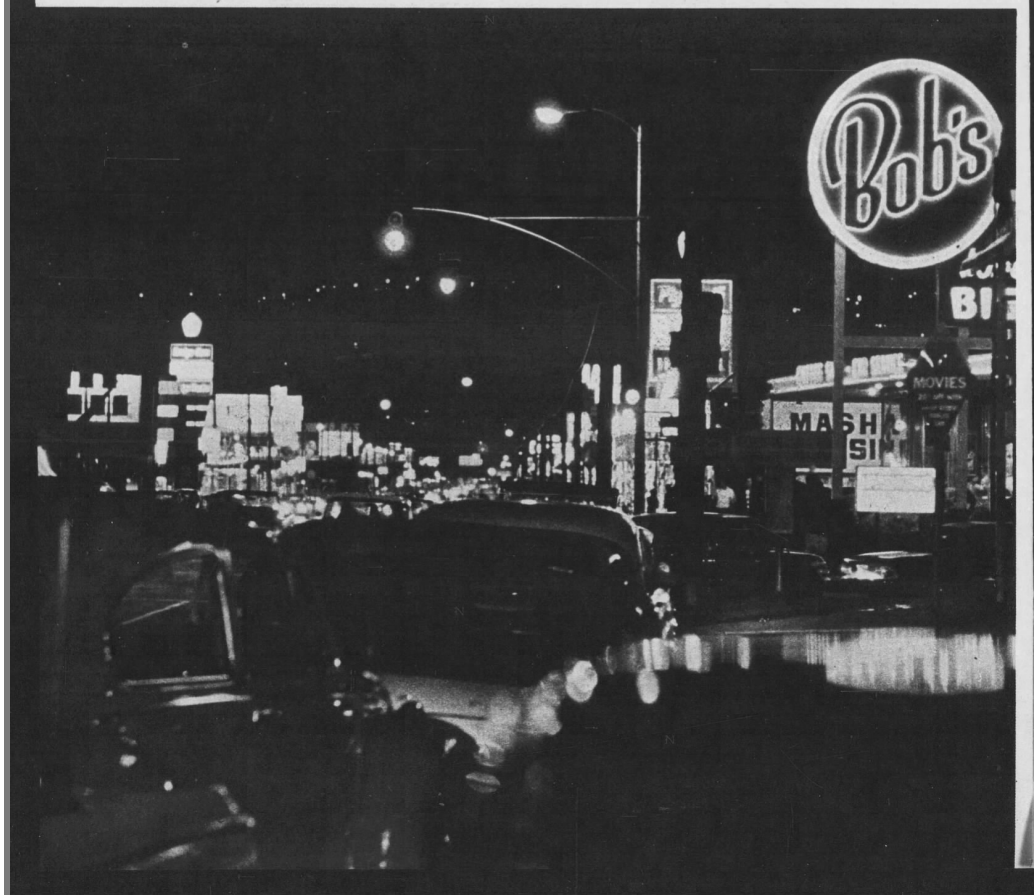
The flow of traffic in and out of the drive-in is regulated by two attendants, one stationed at the entrance, the other within the lot. Jerry, the inside man, wears a green corduroy jacket, jeans, desert boots and tinted glasses. He looks like the archetypal Hollywood hippie, but he dissects a sub-culture with the precision of a social scientist.

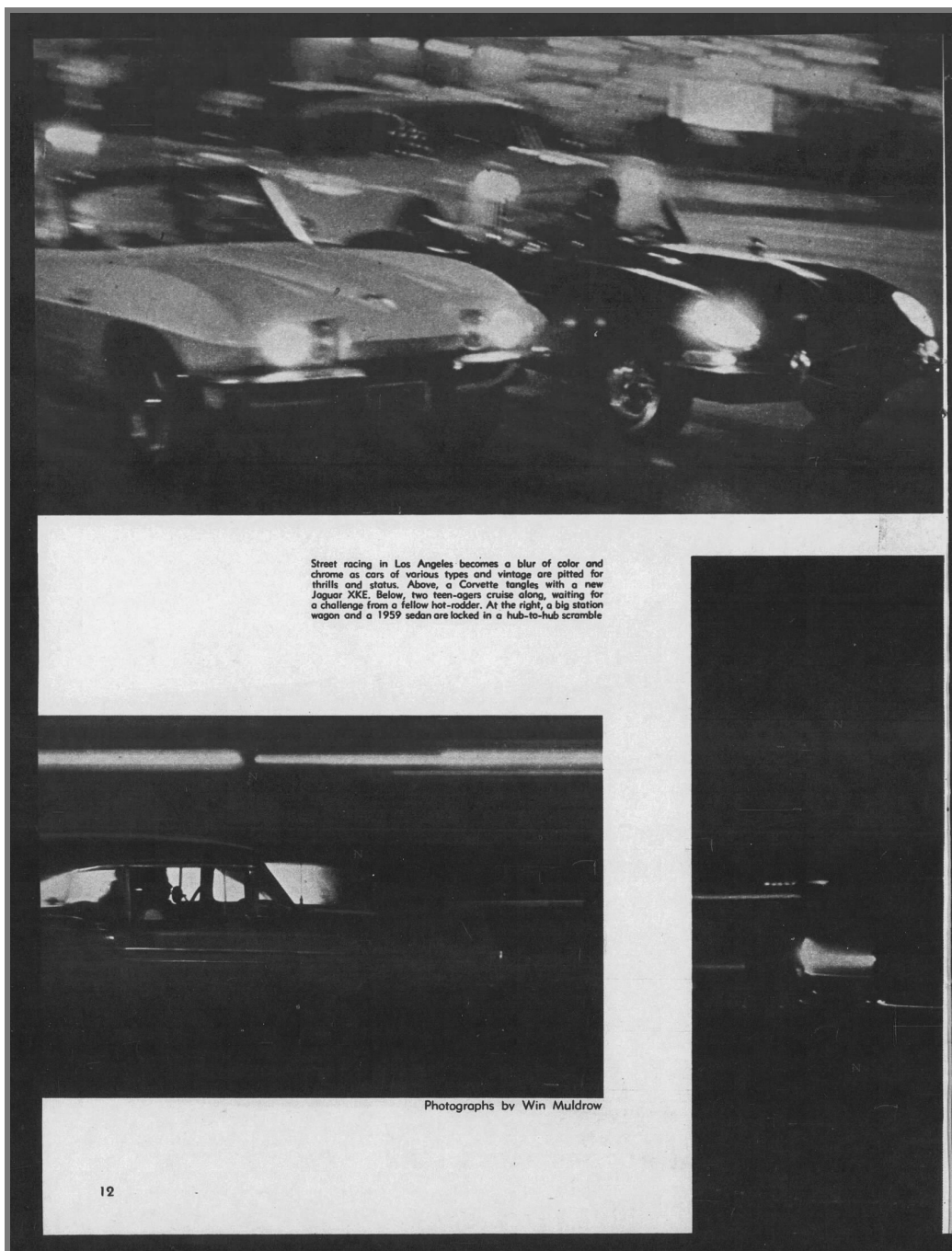
"Basically," he says, "we get three kinds of kids. First, there are the ones with the customized jobs—lowered chassis, maybe a TV set on the dash, a bar or a phone. Those are just for show. Then there are the surfer kids—in

woodies. You know? The station wagons? They're the anything-for-a-laugh bunch. Finally there are the kids with the hot cars. A lot of them wear Speed-Master T-shirts. But the best way to spot them is to listen to the cars. You can usually tell a hot car just by the idle."

Earl, one of the customers, is seated in a new Mustang, munching a hamburger. At 18 and a veteran of three years at the drive-in, Earl qualifies as a sort of elder statesman among street racers.

"There's lots of action around here and lots of bread to be made. You can run on the boulevard, or there's Riverside Drive at Griffith Park, or Forest Lawn Drive off the freeway. A friend of mine made a hundred bucks at Forest Lawn a few weeks ago. There are regular run-offs there, sometimes 200 cars. Well, there were until last week. Some guy totaled his car, so now the heat's on."





Does it require a wreck for the police to locate two hundred hot cars?

"The cops," Earl explains, "knew what was going on. The thing is, the Drive is L.A. County, so they'd have to come all the way over the hill to bust us, which is more trouble than it's worth." Sensing skepticism he concludes, "If you don't believe me, ask any cop."

Two off-duty policemen hired to watch things at Bob's on busy nights don't deny it, but they say it's not indifference. "There's just not much we can do about it. If two cars pull even at a light, and somebody challenges somebody . . ." He shrugs expressively, then continues. "The problem is that these kids have never seen death. They don't realize that their lives can be snuffed out just like *that*."

But street racers are not all middle-class adolescents, playing a super-charged children's game. A number are grown men, many with wives and families. They aren't cases of

arrested development, weaned at drive-ins and unable to cut the cord. As teen-agers, they probably never owned an automobile. They come, usually, from among the city's poor, and, to them, street racing isn't a game, it's a living.

Stretch is a tall, slope-shouldered, 32-year-old Negro, the owner of a modified '62 Corvette, and a success in his chosen field, street racing. His nickname, he explains upon introduction, has nothing to do with his height, but rather is a tribute to the nine-year prison term he served in Mississippi for shooting a white man who molested his sister.

The highest elective office Stretch has attained or aspired to is President of the Western Avenue Street-Racing Association, one of a dozen or so such groups in southern Los Angeles. On Friday and Saturday nights, the 50-odd Association members gather in a parking lot at the corner of 78th and Western. Here

the real business, arranging street-races, is transacted.

At 10 o'clock on this Saturday night, there are 31 cars in the lot, and more arriving all the time. All but four are equipped with racing slicks, foot-wide treadless wheels that provide traction on rubber-burning starts. Since almost every driver brings a coterie of supporters, the actual body count is well over 100.

If the setting is a little grim, the production itself is spirited. The players, in clumps of five or six, are talking, laughing, doing the Boston Monkey with their women, and helping themselves to cans of beer from two cases set atop a Dodge Phoenix. Empty cans are hurled onto the roof of the adjoining warehouse, a practice clearly rooted in tradition, since one keeps hearing the clunk of can against can.

As the decibel level approaches that of a small-scale insurrection, it seems reasonable to anticipate a visit from the police. Stretch,

Continued



Although adults also engage in the ubiquitous "drags" in Los Angeles, the backbone of the street-racing set is made up of teen-agers. One of their favorite gathering places to arrange races is Bob's drive-in in Van Nuys (left). Occasionally, the crowds attract the police, shown citing a teen-ager (above).



Big Willie, at center "promoter" of street races in area of 43rd and Vermont, negotiates with drivers. Street-racing fan studies the instrument panel of a hot car while below a young street-racer inspects the front end of a specially-rigged Falcon hot-rod.



Street Racing Continued

however, is unruffled. "The Man," he says, "don't bother us none."

Under Stretch's benevolent guidance, one moves from group to group exchanging names and handshakes, a bit surprised at how little of the conversation concerns cars. Finally, however, an argument breaks out between a boy of about 19 and an older man standing before the open hood of a silver-and-turquoise Chevrolet. The boy, pointing at the car, is screaming in very nearly a falsetto, "Man, you ain't got nothing. I can whip you any time."

The other, apparently the car's owner, keeps shaking his head and repeating, "I don't want to hear none of that, just lemme see your money, come on, lemme see your money."

Stretch is palpably amused by the dispute. "If that boy showed him some green," he confides between chuckles, "that cat would up and die." Why? "Cause he ain't hot, that's why. If he was, he'd keep that hood shut down." Well, suppose the boy had opened the hood?

A pained look crosses Stretch's face. "Nobody," he explains patiently, "ever touches nobody else's hood."

Stretch's own bullet-colored Corvette is



parked in the shadow of the warehouse, looking, in the dim light, like a slightly bloated torpedo. Oddly, the Vet's hood is open, but this, it seems, is a sort of mockery, since the motor is camouflaged in aluminum casing. In the car, Stretch's girl friend, an attractive 22-year-old redhead named Linda, is weaving her torso in time to transistorized rhythm and blues.

Stretch is waiting for someone called "Pops," the owner and driver of a '62 Ford which is rumored to have a ram-charger, a tremendously powerful racing engine. Stretch has never met nor spoken with Pops, but despite this seemingly insuperable communications gap he's confident that Pops will be here. Street racers, he suggests, work in mysterious ways.

While he is waiting, Stretch takes a pint bottle of Chivas Regal and some colored paper cups from the glove compartment, and pours an inch or two of whisky into the cups. "What should we drink to?" he asks, raising his cup. "To the Vet," Linda proposes. They drink to the Vet.

Pops and the Ford arrive about midnight, and the effect is galvanic. Everyone, some-

how, seems to know who Pops is, and why he's here. The block-party spirit evaporates, and the atmosphere, for the moment, is roughly that of a frontier town before the big shootout on Main Street.

Pops, rotund and rumpled, is hardly a casting director's conception of a street racer. Still, he does have the requisite cool, as, eyes straight ahead and smiling thinly, he walks slowly toward the Vet, ignoring the stares that follow him. When he reaches the car, he looks at it and shakes his head. "Corvette," he says, adding an obscenity. "Bad scene."

Then, turning to Stretch, he asks, "Think you can take my Ford?"

"Think so," Stretch replies.

"So do I," says Pops. "But I'll race you anyway—if you will give me two car lengths."

"I ain't gonna give you nothing," Stretch says. "My transmission is shot, the clutch is all torn up, and you come here with your ram-charger and ask me for space."

"I ain't got no ram-charger," Pops protests.

"Show me," Stretch challenges.

"No, man," says Pops.

The haggling drags on, the number of purported automotive afflictions mounts, and one slowly becomes convinced that either Stretch and Pops, or perhaps both, are colossal liars. Finally, Stretch offers a concession.

"You see this girl here," he says, placing a hand on Linda's shoulder. "Race me even, and I'll let her drive."

The concession, naturally, is a ploy, one of Stretch's favorites, since Linda is an experienced and expert street racer, but Pops ultimately agrees to the arrangement. "No space, but the girl drives." The race is set for three a.m., at Century and El Segundo. The bet is \$300.

Unlike the anticlimax at Forest Lawn, the Century Boulevard *denouement* is nothing if not dramatic. Allowing for the din of two powerful motors turning over at 6,000 revolutions a minute, everything is serene until the race gets under way. Then, about a block from the start, the Ford unaccountably goes out of control, careens wildly to the right, strikes a concrete embankment at 40 m.p.h., caroms back across the road, and finally comes to rest on the traffic island.

It is all on the order of one of those awful anti-hot-rod movies with titles like *Death Takes the Wheel*. Now, following the script, one joins the rush for the Ford, but . . . the door swings open and out steps Pops. There's blood dripping from a gash on his forehead, but he is still smiling that tight little smile. When he inspects the Ford, though, the smile fades. From the front, the car looks like a particularly ugly Pekinese, and, beneath the caved-in hood, the motor is in pieces. It will be months before he can afford another ram-charger.

It is nearly 4 a.m. when the Ford, towed by some Samaritan station wagon, lurches around the corner, leaving the street deserted, until, a few minutes later, an Adohr milk truck swings around the corner and starts down Century Boulevard; all you can hear is the rattle of the milk cases.

A month or so later, a story in the morning paper prompts a phone call to the Hollywood Division of the Los Angeles Police Department. The facts, the sergeant says, are these: On Friday night, August 12th, at four minutes after 10 o'clock, some 400 persons gathered in a service station on Forest Lawn Drive were surprised by a carefully planned and executed police operation involving 25 squad cars, seven unmarked cars, and nearly 100 men. Sixty-six persons were arrested, and 29 cars impounded.

A second phone call, this one to the Hollywood Tow Garage where the impounded cars were taken, reveals that of the 29, a dozen were unmistakably modified for racing. The owner of the garage especially remembers a 1957 Chevrolet with fuel injection and 12-inch slicks.

"When the fella came to pick it up," he recalls, "he said he didn't mind paying the impound fee at all. He said he'd make it all back on the next race."

